

Message Text

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1173

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 BEIRUT 6336

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOO, PINT, LE, SY

SUBJECT: THE LEBANESE CIVIL WAR: HOW WILL IT END UP?

1. SUMMARY: FOLLOWING IS AN ASSESSMENT OF THE CURRENT STATE-OF-AFFAIRS IN LEBANON, PARTICULARLY ADDRESSING SYRIAN MOVES AND THE DECISIVE IMPORT THESE MAY HAVE ON THE OUTCOME OF THE STRUGGLE. IT IS A TRUISM THAT A HOUSE DIVIDED AGAINST ITSELF CANNOT STAND. CIVIL WARS BRING FOREIGN MEDDLING, FOREIGN INTERVENTION, AND SOMETIMES FOREIGN ABSORBTION. ALTHOUGH THE HISTORY OF SYRIAN INTERVENTION IN LEBANON TO DATE HAS YIELDDED CONTRADICTIONS, SURPRISES, AND, FROM THE SYRIAN PERSPECTIVE, SOME SETBACKS, WE BELIEVE THAT -- BARRING A POLITICAL UPHEAVAL IN DAMASCUS, OR A DECISIVE ISRAELI OR OTHER NON-ARAB INTERVENTION -- PARAMOUNT SYRIAN INFLUENCE IN LEBANON IS LIKELY TO ENDURE FOR A LONG TIME. THE IMMEDIATE FUTURE OF LEBANON MAY WELL SEE THE DAWN OF A "PAX SYRIANA" -- AFTER MORE BLOODSHED -- WHICH MAY ENDURE FOR SOME TIME. MEANWHILE, POLITICAL ADJUSTMENTS AMONG LEBANESE RIGHTISTS, LEBANESE LEFTISTS AND PALESTINIANS CAN PROBABLY ONLY BE FORGED IN THE WAKE OF A SYRIAN-IMPOSED CEASEFIRE. EVEN THEN, THE ERSTWHILE LEADERS, MANY OVER THE AGE OF SEVENTY AND OUT OF STEP WITH THE TIMES, WILL HAVE TO RELINQUISH POWER TO A YOUNGER GENERATION. END SUMMARY.

2. THE LEBANESE CIVIL WAR HAS, BY THE MOST COMMON

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DEFINITION, NOW GONE ON SOME FIFTEEN MONTHS, MUCH LONGER

THAN ANYONE INVOLVED IN IT OR OBSERVING IT COULD HAVE EXPECTED AT THE OUTSET OR EVEN AS IT WORE ON. LEBANESE AND FOREIGNERS ALOKE, SENSING THAT THIS WAS A WAR WITHOUT A CAUSE, HAVE PERSISTENTLY THOUGHT THAT THIS OR THAT POLITICAL AGREEMENT OR -- MORE RECENTLY -- THIS OR THAT MILITARY VICTORY -- WOULD SET THE STAGE FOR A POLITICAL PATCH JOB WHICH WOULD ESSENTIALLY RESTORE THE STATUS QUO ANTE, WITH SUITABLE ADJUTOOTTOTLOO#THE TIMES. THE LUDICROUS NUMBER OF "CEASE-FIRES" -- 51 BY A RECENT COUNT -- IS ELOQUENT TESTIMONY TO THE FUTILITY OF THE POLITICAL PROCESS AND AT THE SAME TIME THE PERSISTENCE OF THOSE WHO BELIEVE IN IT.

3. THE ORIGINS OF THE WAR ARE COMPLEX, AND PERCEIVED DIFFERENTLY BY THE VARIOUS PROTAGONISTS. THERE WAS A DEMOGRAPHIC DIMENSION: THE OLD CONFESSONALIST SYSTEM WAS BASED ON THE FACT -- THIRTY YEARS AGO -- OF A CHRISTIAN MAJORITY, AND, WITHIN THE MOSLEM CAMP, OF A SUNNI MAJORITY. CHRISTIANS NO LONGER OUTNUMBER MOSLEMS; AND SUNNIS NO LONGER OUTNUMBER WKLTNS,#THERE WAS A

SOCIAL DIMENSION: THE DOMINANT MARONITES PROSPERED MOST OF ALL IN THE OLD CAPITALIST LEBANON, ENTREPOT OF THE INCREASINGLY WEALTHY ARAB WORLD, BUT WERE LEAST PROLIFIC AND MOST INCLINED TO EMIGRATE. THERE HAS BEEN A FAIRLY HIGH DEGREE OF CORRELATION IN SEVERAL INSTANCES BETWEEN SECTARIAN AFFILIATION AND SOCIO/ECONOMIC STATUS. A MAJORITY OF ARMY OFFICERS INN KEY POSITIONS WERE CHRISTIAN; A MAJORITY OF THE TROOPS WERE MOSLEM. IN BEIRUT, SHIITE MOSLEMS GENERALLY CONSTITUTE THE POOREST CLASSES. THERE WAS AP POLITICAL/CONSTITUTIOONAL DIMENSION: THE AFOREMENTIONED DEMOGRAPHIC ANND SOCIO/ECONOMIC CHANGES OF THE LAST THIRTY OR FORTY YEARS SIMPLY HAVE NOT BEEN TAKEN SUFFICIENTLY INTO ACCOUNT IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS, IN PART BECAUSE THE WRITTEN AND UNWRITTEN CONSTITUTION HAS PROVEN TOO RIGID, IN PART BECAUSE THE RULING GENERATION HAS BEEN REMARKABLY UNABLE -- OR UNWILLING -- TO PLAY THE POLITICAL GAME BY THE UNWRITTEN YET INEXORABLE PRINCIPLES OF PARLIAMENTARY GOVERNMENT

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(COMPROMISE, CONSENSUS, RESPECT FOR THE LAW, ETC.). FINALLY, THE PALESTINAIAN PROBLEM (SOME 400,000 IN A COUNTRY WITH A TOTAL POPULATION OF SOME 3,000,000) HAS CONSTITUTED A UNIQUE STRESS SUCH AS PERHAPS NO RELATIVELY DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL FRAMEWORK COULD ENDURE.

4. AT THE MOMENT THERE IS NO VIABLE LEBANESE POLITICAL PROCESS. LEADERS OF THE "RIGHT" (TO INCLUDE FRANGIE,

CHAMOUN, GEMAYEL AND PERE CASSIS), THE LEFT (JUMBLATT) AND THE PALESTINIANS (ARAFAT) FIND THEMSELVES CONDUCTING A WAR. THEIR POLITICS ARE DOMINATED BY THE BATTLEFIELD. POLITICAL VOICES WITHOUT MILITARY CLOUT ARE EITHER IGNORED (EDDE), OR SCOFFED AT (SARKIS). RADICAL VOICES ON THE RIGHT (GUARDIANS OF THE CEDARS) AND LEFT (LT. KATIB'S "LEBANESE ARAB ARMY"), WHICH WOULD HAVE BEEN IGNORED IN MORE TRANQUIL TIMES, HAVE ARisen AND ARE LISTENED TO, SIMPLY BECAUSE THEY SPEAK WITH THE AUTHORITY OF THE GUN.

5. THE DOGS OF WAR ARE NOT EXHAUSTED BY THE PERSISTENCE OF COMBAT. LIKE THE FIRE WHICH HAS SMOULDERED IN THE PORT OF BEIRUT FOR AN INCREDIBLE EIGHT MONTHS, THE WAR FEEDS ON ITSELF. THE ABUNDANCE OF ARMS, AMMUNITION AND SUPPLIES TO ALL SIDES (AT LEAST UNTIL RECENTLY) HAS FUELED THE FIRE, BUT THE HEAT OF THE FIRE HAS BEEN INTERNALLY GENERATED AS EACH VIOLENT INCIDENT, AND NOW, BATTLE, HAS GENERATED A PSYCHOLOGICAL NEED FOR THE OFFENDED SIDE TO SEEK REVENGE. THE BREAKDOWN OF LAW-AND-ORDER FURTHERMORE HAS PERMITTED A RELEASE OF PENT-UP PETTY PERSONAL AND SMALL GROUP ANIMOSITIES WHICH MIGHT HAVE MERELY SMOULDERED WITHIN A MORE NORMAL FRAMEWORK OF GOVERNMENTAL AND POLICE AUTHORITY. INDEED, A GENERATION IS ALREADY EMERGING WHICH KNOWS BETTER THE LAW OF THE JUNGLE (OR STREET) THAN THAT OF AN ORDERED SOCIETY. THE ABUNDANCE OF WEAPONS AND MONEY IS RAPIDLY DEVELOPING A GUN-SLINGER CASTE, WHOSE LIVELIHOOD IS BEST SECURED BY BEARING ARMS RATHER THAN THE PURSUIT OF ANY "PEACEFUL" TRADE.

6. LEBANON'S INSTITUTIONALIZED VIOLENCE WILL NOT BE SWEPT ASIDE OR EVEN INHIBITED BY MERE DOCUMENTS OR SECRET

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POLITICAL COMPACTS, WHETHER THEY BE OF INTERNAL ORIGIN (SUCH AS THE PROGRAM OF THE "NATIONAL FRONT" OF RAYMOND EDDE) OR EXTERNAL ORIGIN (SUCH AS THE PARTIAL EFFORTS TO DATE OF THE ARAB LEAGUE, OR, FOR THAT MATTER, THE SYRIAN-IMPOSED AGREEMENTS OF FEBRUARY). THE ONLY WAY OUT OF CONTINUED INSTITUTIONALIZED VIOLENCE IN OUR VIEW WILL BE OVERWHELMING PHYSICAL DEPRIVATION, CRUSHING MILITARY POWER, OR A COMBINATION OF BOTH.

7. THE SYRIANS ATTEMPTED A LIMITED MILITARYY INTERVENTION AT THE BEGINNING OF THE YEAR IN THE CONTEXT OF A BASICALLY POLITICAL STRATEGY. AFTER AUSPICIOUS BEGINNINGS, IT FAILED. ASSAD HAD UNDERESTIMATED THE DEPTH OF THE LEBANESE CONFLICT. IN EARLY JUNE, AFTER IT BECAME CLEAR THAT THE ELECTION OF

ELIAS SARKIS AS PRESIDENT WAS NOT GOING TO HAVE ANY IMPACT ON THE CONDUCT OF THE WAR, THE SYRIANS TURNED TO A BASICALLY MILITARY STRATEGY. THIS TIME, APPARENTLY, ASSAD HAD OVERESTIMATED THE WEIGHT OF "HIS" OWN PALESTINIANS, SAIQA (AND THE LOYALTY OF THE PLA) AND UNDERESTIMATED THE LIABILITIES OF TANK WARFARE IN CITY STREETS. IN LATE JUNE, THE SYRIAN ARMY WITHDREW FROM THE AREA OF BEIRUT AND THE EDGES OF SIDON, BUT BEGAN A PROCESS OF CONSOLIDATION, STILL GOING ON, OF ITS DOMINANCE IN THE INTERIOR HALF OF THE COUNTRY.

NOTE BY OC/T: BEIRUT 6336/1. #AS RECEIVED.
CORRECTION TO FOLLOW.

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8. IT NOW APPEARS THAT SYRIA HAS FOUND A STRATEGY WHICH, IF OUR ANALYSIS IS CORRECT, HAS A FAIR CHANCE OF SUCCESS. IT HAS SEVERAL ELEMENTS:

A. DE FACTO ALLIANCE WITH THE CHRISTIAN FRONT, DIVERTING AND TYING UP THE LARGELY PALESTINIAN ALLIANCE OF PALESTINIANS AND LEBANESE LEFTISTS IN SCATTERED PLACES ALL OVER THE COUNTRY, PERMITTING THE CHRISTIANS TO REVERSE THE PREVALENT MILITARY TIDE SINCE THIS BECAME A FULL-SCALE CIVIL WAR AND TO TAKE THE OFFENSIVE AT TELL ZAATAR, TRIPOLI, AND PERHAPS NEXT EAST OF BEIRUT OR IN BEIRUT ITSELF.

B. INTERDICTION, BY LAND AND SEA, OF THE PALESTINIAN/LEFTIST SOURCES OF FOREIGN SUPPORT. THE SYRIANS WERE DRIVEN FROM THE STREETS OF SIDON, BUT THEY

HAVE SCARED OFF SHIPPING THROUGH THAT PORT, ALTHOUGH THEY MAY PERMIT
CONTINUED SHIPMENT OF BASIC CIVILIAN NECESSITIES, AND HAVE
SERIOUSLY DAMAGED THE ONE REFINERY AND SIGNIFICANT FUEL
SOURCE AVAILABLE TO THE PALESTINIAN/LEFTIST SIDE. THE
BEIRUT AIRPORT HAS BEEN EFFECTIVELY CLOSED BY THE THREAT
OF CHRISTIAN ARTILLERY FIRE. THE NORTHERN PALESTINIAN/
LEFTIST PORT OF ENTRY, TRIPOLI, IS NOW EFFECTIVELY
ISOLATED FROM THE BULK OF THE PALESTINIAN/LEFTIST FORCES
IN THE SOUTH BY SYRIAN OPERATIONS IN THE BEKAA VALLEY
AND ON THE EASTERN RIDGE OF MT. LEBANON. THE ONLY
PORT STILL OPEN TO THE PALESTINIAN/LEFTIST ALLIANCE IS
TYRE -- SOME 20 KILOMETERS FROM THE ISRAELI BORDER. IT

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REMAINS TO BE SEEN IF THE SYRIANS WILL TRY TO CLOSE IT
DOWN, RISKING A POSSIBLE CONFRONTATION WITH ISRAEL ON
THAT ACCOUNT.

C. COOPERATION WITH THE ARAB LEAGUE. SYRIA MAY
BE THE ONLY COUNTRY IN HISTORY TO HAVE DEPLOYED BOTH A
"PEACE-KEEPING FORCE" UNDER "SEMI-INTERNATIONAL"
AUSPICES AND AN ARMY EQUIPPED FOR COMBAT WITH A COMBAT
MISSION TO A FOREIGN COUNTRY SIMULTANEOUSLY. ASSAD
HAS MANAGED TO KEEP FAIRLY GOOD COUNSEL WITH MOST OF
THE ARAB WORLD (EXCEPT IRAQ AND LIBYA) AND ACTUALLY
MENDED FENCES SOMEWHAT WITH EGYPT. THE ARAB LEAGUE,
FOR ITS PART, HAS SO FAR BEEN CAREFUL TO AVOID
CONFRONTING ASSAD, AND SEEMS LIKELY TO CONTINUE TO DO
SO. THE SYRIANS THUS SEEM WELL ON THE WAY TO
ISOLATING THE PALESTINIANS NOT ONLY MILITARILY BUT
POLITICALLY AS WELL.

9. THE NEW SYRIAN STRATEGY WILL TAKE TIME TO
WORK, THE PALESTINIANS/LEFTISTS ARE STILL NOT BEATEN.
THEY APPEAR TO HAVE ADEQUATE SUPPLIES ON HAND (ALTHOUGH
THEY MAY SOON BE OUT OF FUEL AND THEY ARE LOW IN HEAVY
AMMUNITION) DISPERSED THROUGHOUT THEIR AREAS OF CONTROL.
THEY HAVE SUFFERED SOME SERIOUS LOSSES OF TROOPS, BUT
STILL HAVE AN EXTENSIVE POOL OF ARMED, IF NOT TRAINED,
MANPOWER ON WHICH TO DRAW. THEY HAVE ACQUIRED
EXTENSIVE EXPERIENCE IN THE KIND OF FIGHTING IN THE
STREETS AND BYWAYS OF LEBANON WHICH THE SYRIANS STILL
LACK. THEY SURELY STILL HOPE FOR RENEWED SUPPORT
FROM RADICAL ARAB AND SOVIET SOURCES. BUT TIME IS AGAINST
THEM. UNDER SIEGE, THERE IS NO LIKELY SOURCE OF
EXTERNAL RELIEF.

10. BARRING A MAJOR INTERVENTION ORIGINATING FROM
ELSEWHERE IN THE ARAB WORLD (IRAQ?), ISRAEL, OR FROM
EITHER OR BOTH OF THE TWO SUPERPOWERS, WE BELIEVE

THAT THE NEW SYRIAN STRATEGY HAS A VERY HIGH CHANCE OF SUCCESS. WE DEFER TO COLLEAGUES IN BAGHDAD AND DAMASCUS ON THE LIKELIHOOD OR CHANCES OF SUCCESS OF IRAQI INTERVENTION (IN SYRIA), OR THE LIKELIHOOD OF A COUP IN DAMASCUS, BUT WE NOTE THAT EMBASSY

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DAMASCUS HAS REPORTED SIGNS OF CONSIDERABLE CONFIDENCE WITHIN THE ASSAD REGIME. ISRAEL COULD PLAY A SPOILER ROLE, DETERRING THE SYRIANS FROM TYRE, THUS INSURING A PROLONGATION OF THE BLOODLETTING OF BOTH SYRIANS AND PALESTINIANS, OR IT MIGHT TAKE A LONGER VIEW, JUDGING THAT IT MIGHT BE EASIER IN THE FUTURE TO DEAL WITH AN ASSAD THAN A NEW SYRIAN REGIME WHICH, UNDER THE STRESS OF EVENTS IN LEBANON, MIGHT SUCCEED ASSAD IN POWER.

11. SYRIA'S OBJECTIVES IN LEBANON, LIKE THE OBJECTIVES OF THE VARIOUS WARRING FACTIONS IN LEBANON ITSELF, ARE NOT CLEAR. IN LINE WITH HISTORICAL SYRIAN INTERESTS, ASSAD MAY SEE AN OPPORTUNITY TO DOMINATE, EVEN ABSORB, LEBANON. LEBANESE CHRISTIANS SHOW LIMITED CONCERN AT THIS PROSPECT AT PRESENT -- THEY PROBABLY BELIEVE THEY CAN ASSURE THEIR OWN INTERESTS WHATEVER SYRIA ATTEMPTS. WE TEND TO THINK THAT UPPERMOST IN ASSAD'S MIND IS TO BRING THE PALESTINIANS TO HEEL, SO THAT HE CAN THUS TURN TO THE INTRACTABLE TASK OF CONFRONTING ISRAEL, PERHAPS FINDING A COMPROMISE SOLUTION, DEALING FROM A POSITION OF STRENGTH AND ABLE TO IN EFFECT DOMINATE A UNIFIED SYRIAN-JORDANIAN-PALESTINIAN BARGAINING COUNTERPART TO ISRAEL.

12. BUT WHAT OF THE SHORT TERM? ASSAD WILL HAVE TO SHOW TANGIBLE GAINS FROM HIS LEBANON ADVENTURE, BUT, AT THE SAME TIME, AVOID THE KIND OF MILITARY SETBACK EXPERIENCED A MONTH AGO AT SIDON. WERE THE SYRIAN ARMY TO ATTEMPT A CONQUEST OF WEST BEIRUT ON THE GROUND, WE ARE CERTAIN IT COULD ONLY BE ACHIEVED AT COLOSSAL COST IN BOTH MANPOWER AND ARMAMENTS. AT THE SAME TIME, THE PALESTINIANS, WITH OR WITHOUT EXTERNAL SUPPORT, WILL SURELY FIGHT EVEN HARDER AS THE CENTERS OF THEIR POWER IN LEBANON ARE BROUGHT UNDER FIRE. ON BALANCE, WE THINK THE WISEST STRATEGY FROM ASSAD'S VIEWPOINT WOULD BE TO CONTINUE HIS CAMPAIGN OF INTERDICTION AND ATTRITION, LETTING THE CHRISTIAN MILITIAS PURSUE THEIR MORE WARLIKE SCHEMES UNTIL SUCH TIME AS THE PALESTINIANS THEMSELVES REALIZE THAT THEIR ONLY HOPE IS TO BARGAIN FOR SYRIAN RESTRAINT OF THE CHRISTIAN ONSLAUGHT. ASSAD WILL THEN BE IN A POSITION TO BARGAIN FOR A MODUS VIVENDI IN

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LEBANON TO HIS LIKING.

13. THE FORM A "PAX SYRIANA" MIGHT TAKE IN LEBANON WILL DEPEND ON MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS AND THE ENSUING BARGAINING PROCESS, BUT WE THINK IT MIGHT HAVE THE FOLLOWING PRINCIPAL CHARACTERISTICS:

A. WITHDRAWAL OF SYRIAN TROOPS FROM MOST OF BUT NOT NECESSARILY ALL OF LEBANON, AND ONLY WHEN ORDER IS RESTORED.

B. NO PARTITION, BUT POSSIBLY SOME FORM OF "REGIONALIZATION" OR "CANTONIZATION" -- AT LEAST FOR A PERIOD OF TIME.

C. A SYRIAN-DOMINATED PALESTINIAN MOVEMENT. SAIQA PERSONNEL MIGHT BE INSTALLED IN KEY POSITIONS, OR ELEMENTS WITHIN THE EXISTING PLO MIGHT BE FOUND WILLING TO STRIKE A BARGAIN WITH SYRIA.

D. ESTABLISHED GUIDELINES FOR REGULATING PALESTINIAN ACTIVITIES IN LEBANON UNDER A RECONSTITUTED AND SYRIAN-INFLUENCED LEBANESE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT, BUT CONTINUEING PROBLEMS WITH THE PALESTINIANS NEVERTHELESS.

E. A LEBANESE REGIME SUBSTANTIALLY BASED ON THE EXISTING CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP BUT WITH SOME MODIFICATIONS WHICH WOULD DISFAVOR MOSLEMS LESS.

F. EMERGENCE, OVER A PERIOD OF TIME, OF A YOUNGER GENERATION OF POLITICAL LEADERS AND AN ACCOMPANYING WEAKENING OF THE POWER OF THE FEUDALLY-BASED POLITICIANS.

14. SYRIA WILL SURELY WORK FOR A RIGHT-LEFT LEBANESE RAPPROCHEME, LEST ITS POSITION WITH ITS OWN MOSLEM POPULATION AND THE MOSLEM WORRLD GENERALLY BE WEAKENED. THE ALAWITE ASSAD WILL PROBABLY RELY HEAVILY ON TECHNIQUES OF POLITICAL CONTROL WITH WHICH HE IS FAMILIAR -- PARTY APPRATUS, INTELLIGENCE OPERATIVES, AND POLICE.

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